

THE LITTLE MASTER OF THE SKY¹

By MANUEL KOMROFF

(From *The Dial*)

EVEN idiots it seems have their place and purpose in society, or as a chess player would say tapping his fingers on the board — "That pawn may cost you your queen." The little village of M — only realized this after it was too late.

The police of M — all knew that Peter, a half-wit, or "Silly Peter" as he was called, was perfectly harmless; even though at times he would litter the streets and market-place with bread crumbs. But the pigeons of M — soon cleared the walks.

Peter, it seems, had at an early age dedicated his silly life to the pigeons. All his cares and sorrows were bound up in the lives of the birds. In fact it seemed as though he himself became birdlike. He could flap his arms to his sides and produce that same dull penetrating note that was given only to this particular species of bird when they flapped their wings.

At an early age he was left without parents and managed to grow up among the horses and cows in the barns. But these larger animals were entirely out of his sphere — he did not understand them.

One day when the lad was about seven years old, the village folks suddenly noticed that he was lame. When asked about it, all he would reply was: "The pigeons made me lame."

Luba, a farmer's fat cook, once told at the market-place how Peter became lame. She told of how the boy

¹ Copyright, 1921, by The Dial Publishing Company, Inc.

Copyright, 1922, by Manuel Komroff.

stood on the roof of her master's barn flapping his arms in imitation of the birds encircling his head; how he sprang in the air in a mad attempt to fly, and fell to the ground. But Luba had a reputation for being a liar, and none believed her although all enjoyed listening. "Such good imagination," they would say, after she was gone.

Peter grew up a little lame, but this defect seemed only to add to his nimbleness. He could climb a telegraph pole sideways like a parrot walking up a stick. Once on top he would swing his good leg around the cross beam and wave his hat—and from below a flight of flapping and fluttering birds would arise.

In this way he lived and grew to the age of sixteen, although his small, protruding bones and round, child-like eyes kept him looking younger. Where he slept and where he ate, all remained a mystery to the village folk; but this mystery was not near as great as another—

The schoolmaster once noticed that at times the pigeons seemed all grey, and at other times the greater number of them carried large pink breasts; also at times there were few, while on other days the streets and market-place were thickly dotted with nodding, pecking birds; also that never could they find the very young ones.

It seemed as though only Peter knew the secret—but when asked about it he would show a silly grin and shy away, pretending to be much occupied chasing the birds that ever flocked about him.

He would travel about from barn to barn collecting the feed that fell from the bins of careless animals. He would sometimes travel along the back yards, twist his mouth and call to nobody in particular: "A few crumbs for the birdies, lady?" And presently through an open window a crust would fly, and with this buried in his hat he would be off.

Only among the poor would he hobble about. He never ventured up the hill where the better people lived; and it is perhaps for this reason that he was seldom disturbed.

To himself Silly Peter was monarch of the air. In his own distorted mind he was master of all creatures

that flew. Worldly cares he left to those who had inherited worldly material; as for himself, he was concerned only with the aerial strata and with the feathery creatures thereof. Nobody wanted it; so he acquired it as he acquired the cast-off hat that he wore. He fathomed it, tasted it, drank it, navigated his creatures through it, and even fanned life into it by flapping his bony arms.

He understood the air and the sky, and it all belonged to him. Every atom of sky that poured itself over the village of M — belonged to Silly Peter. It seemed as though he purposely limped lightly over the ground that was foreign to his nature; for he was captain and master of the sky.

II

"We must first loosen the ground," said a petty officer. "If the soil is too hard, then the action will drag. And quick action and a brisk finish always make for a better picture."

"Hey, you!" commanded the Captain. "Go get another shovel and help dig."

While two soldiers stood digging in a rectangular plot in the market-place, the camera-men had set up and were adjusting a motion picture apparatus. Twenty-five feet away stood six soldiers leaning on their rifles talking and laughing.

"Enough digging!" shouted the Captain. "Turn the loose earth back into the pit." The soldiers obeyed.

"Are you ready?" he said as he turned to the camera-men.

"All ready," came the reply.

"Now," said the Captain winking maliciously to two of his men. "You run around and pick me up a beggar."

The soldiers started off, pushing their way through the sheepish crowd and into a side street. [After walking a few hundred paces one remarked to the other: "When you don't need them, a hundred are upon you. When you want them — the devil take it."

At last they came upon Silly Peter and decided that he would answer.

"Come along, boy; the Captain wants you," they said, taking hold of his arms.

"Let me go!" The boy struggled. "I did nothing."

"Come along, you fool!"

They brought Silly Peter to the square, placed him on the spot that smelled fresh with upturned earth, placed a shovel in his hands and told him to dig his grave.

When they stepped aside, the terrified boy could see the camera before him and the six soldiers standing at attention a few paces away. Already the clicking handles started turning.

"Dig!" shouted the Captain.

"I don't want a grave," whimpered the frightened creature as several pigeons approached. "I don't want a grave," as he turned up the loose earth with trembling shovel-strokes. "I don't want a grave," and tears ran in trickling rivulets down his silly face.

Even an idiot could understand. At one side of him he was confronted with death for no apparent reason at all. And on the other side of him flew his pigeons.

Suddenly the signal was given; the six rifles were raised, and a volley of blank cartridges shot at the boy. The frightened birds flew into the air as the twisted frame of Silly Peter sank into the soft, upturned earth.

When the smoke had cleared, a soldier came up and shouted: "Hey fool? Get up!—You're not dead." But the boy only sobbed, with his face beside the shovel in the fresh earth.

The soldiers were dismissed, and the Captain climbed into his carriage and drove away. The sheep-like inhabitants of the village of M ——— feared to venture near the spot of military manoeuvre.

Presently an old farmer, driving his horse across the square, stopped, lifted the boy, and said: "Don't cry, Peter. It is only a little joke. See, you're not dead — here, pick up your hat. See all the pigeons are around us — you're not dead."

The boy seemed numb and twisted like the limb of a tree as the old man following his horse helped him across the market-place and through the lane.

"Don't be foolish, Peter. You're not dead. See the

pigeons; see the sky. Look, here is Luba — she will bring us soup."

But the boy squinted at the sun through a film of tears and with his one-sided mouth mumbled: "I don't want a grave."

III

The Captain lit a cigarette as he leaned back in the carriage. The horses snorted as they drew up the hill. "Why," he asked himself, "are people afraid of dying? For many, life can hold little attraction, yet even an imbecile fears death as though it were the devil himself. Yet each man nurses his own pet fears."

The carriage rocked from side to side as it climbed the hill, and the Captain turned his mind to his young wife. "It's all imagination; that's what I think," he said to himself. "It's all in her mind. Now she's afraid of this and afraid of that, and in this way she worries herself ill.

"And the doctor thinks he knows it all, but he knows nothing. He should have given her iron, she's too pale. Now we shall have to call him again. It is all a trick that doctors have. Yes, each man looks out for himself. But I will call him again and say to him: 'Don't you think a little iron would be good for her, she is so pale?' And he will reply: 'Yes, it can't harm.' But I would have to say this to the doctor when he is putting on his coat in the hallway so that Vera does not hear.

"No. Vera must not hear that I think her pale. It would worry her and she might become worse. Then she would have to go to bed again, the doctor would come again, and the servants would do as they pleased. And Vera would grow worse and more nervous and —"

"Here we are!" called the coachman, and the Captain stepped out upon his own lawn.

The house was built of stone, and although its architecture was plain, it had the solidity of a castle. Even the vines that grew up the lattice-work and walls seemed to intertwine their curly branches into a living network that helped fortify the stone nest of the Captain and his beautiful Vera.

The lovely creature was passing her hands lightly over the keyboard of the piano as the Captain entered.

"It is only I," he called, but she was startled nevertheless.

"I am glad you came," she said as she rose to meet him, and placing her pale head on his decorated breast added — "I am afraid to remain here alone."

"But where are the servants, my dear?"

"Oh, servants don't count."

"Well, well, my darling," spoke the Captain, petting her. "You have nothing to fear. It is all imagination."

"But I am so nervous."

"Come, my dear. Let's have tea and I will tell you a funny story."

Presently they were seated at the table drinking tea, and the Captain began his story.

"You know, my dear," he said; "we are going to put an end to all this foolish political talk and people's committees. Any beggar forms a committee, and they do what they like. Civil authorities and military authorities are all alike to them."

"Oh, I am so afraid of beggars," interrupted the beautiful Vera.

"Well, my dear; soon there will be nothing to be afraid of; a propaganda council was organized at headquarters this morning, and what do you think? This morning two men arrived with a moving picture camera to take pictures of our orderly town, and in the afternoon we took an object-lesson picture. I marched the soldiers into the square and we dug up a plot so that the earth might be soft.

"Then we had a beggar dig his own grave as we took the picture. When he had dug enough, I gave the signal and the firing squad drew up their rifles and blazed away."

"Why did you kill him?"

"No, my dear; we only pretended to kill him. I myself was careful to see that the leads were taken off the cartridge. But you see we could not tell the beggar that he was not going to die because we wanted to make the picture look realistic — he might have run away in the middle and ruined the film.

"Well, my dear, to make a long story short, the fool beggar fell into the pit, believing himself really killed. It will make a fine picture. It will be shown in all the surrounding towns as an object lesson, and before the picture itself appears on the screen it will be entitled — I suggested it myself — it will read — "This is what happened to a fool who thought he could oppose the military authorities," and then will be shown the picture of the beggar digging his own grave.

"It will be a great lesson and education to the people whose heads have been turned. It will be sent all over the country and if the results are favourable and it pleases headquarters who can say," at this point he clasped his wife's pale hand, "who can say that I will not receive another decoration, or perhaps a promotion? Who can tell, my dear? Things move so quickly these days."

In the evening as they were eating, Vera looked up from her plate and spoke: "You know, if it happened to me, I think I should die."

"Don't talk nonsense," replied the Captain angered by the idea. "How could it happen to you?"

"Well, supposing the revolutionists took control, and then —"

"Supposing! Supposing the sky should fall," he interrupted, and smiled on his lovely and delicate Vera.

IV

Silly Peter refused to eat the bowl of soup that Luba placed out for him, but he went aloft in the barn and cried in his dull, monotonous tone: "I don't want a grave — I don't want a grave," until he fell asleep.

Then over his simple, slumbering brain came a vision. He saw himself standing on an elevated place and over him rested the great ultramarine dome of sky. About him he could see the horizon as though it were a white circle of foam.

Gradually this circle grew smaller and smaller and rose up like a sparkling and living halo. As it came nearer, he discovered that the circle was composed of hundreds of white doves.

Soon they were close over him encircling the elevation on which he stood, and he could hear the wild beating of the wings as though they were rolling a tattoo on muffled drums. Then suddenly the circle broke, and rose like a puff of smoke against a sky of blue.

With startling rapidity it rose until it rent and perforated the sky, and was lost from sight. Only a large oval opening of light-grey nothingness remained overhead — a hole in the sky — an opening to heaven.

Then from all quarters came a loud uproar; a thousand piercing, whistling yells; a rackety, rumbling, rattling commotion mixed with the beat and swish of wings. This was followed by an upward rush which darkened the sky.

Peter saw himself standing like a monarch reviewing his nation from an elevated platform. Around him flew the feathered tribes of the air. From the fluttering starling to the giant albatross, all were liberated and each paid homage to him — the master of the sky, before they shot upward and through the oval opening in the rent heaven. It was a grand and colourful sight to behold.

Finally they were all gone and he saw himself take a last look about him as he stood alone on his elevation. He then craned his neck and turned his face to the oval nothingness — flapped his arms, and with a thrilling sensation flew heavenward. His body went through the air a little sideways — but it flew, and the rest did not matter.

Poor Peter awoke to find himself in the loft of the barn among his cages of pigeons, confronted with the sordidness of material reality. He opened a small window and then flung open the cages.

Through the night he limped from barn to barn, darting under wagons, and between the legs of slumbering horses, opening doors, boxes, and even barrels. He was liberating the imprisoned, full-breasted creatures.

The little village of M — slept soundly as it was being flooded with fluttering birds. Only the hypersensitive Vera was disturbed by the monotonous beating of restless wings.

No longer was there any mystery regarding the pigeons.

V

In the morning the streets were covered with pink-breasted birds as well as grey. Besides this, there were breeds and species of pigeons that the villagers of M — had never seen before. Wherever one turned, one saw pigeons. They were on the ground and in the sky, as well as upon the roofs. Their colours were mixed, and their leaders were lost.

Silly Peter ran joyfully about the streets waving a little white flag at the disorganized flying tribes, waving a white flag as though it were a truce to the sky.

For some reason or other, an extra large number of birds took refuge on the gable and chimney of the Captain's stone house on the hill.

Late in the afternoon, as the charming Vera was playing at the piano, a dark shadow crept over her page of music, and this was accompanied by a scrambling noise from outside. As she turned about, she could see through the corner of her eye a struggling figure across the window, clambering on the vines. The body was silhouetted against the sky.

One glance was sufficient — her throat let loose a piercing scream as she ran from the room into the kitchen. "A man! A man is climbing up the house — quick, send for the police!" she shouted breathlessly to the servants.

Holding her throbbing temples with both hands, she waited with the servants in the kitchen. Soon two policemen arrived, having been told that a robber had entered the house, but they found nothing excepting Silly Peter on top of the roof, propped against the chimney, waving his flag and signalling to his birds.

"He's harmless," said the officer. "I can't make him come down, madam. I'm a policeman, not a fireman." And with this they went away, leaving Vera with her servants and Peter with his pigeons.

Presently the Captain came home, raved and shouted as he swung his arms — but Peter sat with his back against the chimney, making bubbles with his mouth and holding two new-born birds close to his face in order that they might prick the bubbles with their little soft beaks and drink.

"Come down from my house, you beggar!" But this did not even frighten the birds that flocked about Silly Peter in ever increasing numbers.

At length he came into the house, and took a rifle from his case. "Just wait till it grows dark," he mumbled. But the lovely Vera jumped from her chair and, with tears in her eyes, cried: "No! No! God will see you. He will never forgive us. After all, what harm does the boy do? He did not intend to frighten me, I am sure. Put it away, my dear — God will never forgive us if you don't."

Who could resist a pleading tear from lovely Vera? Surely not the Captain.

"You are right, my dear. He can do us no harm," he finally allowed.

At night there was a noise and commotion on the roof. Vera awoke, but then all was silent again. A fearful silence hung over the house, interrupted only by the heavy breathing of her devoted soldier husband.

She remained awake until morning and was glad when she heard the servants stir. Then thinking that a little music might be restful, she dressed herself lightly and went down to the drawing room, opened the piano and finally opened the shutter. There beneath her on the ground lay Peter, with his face up — dead. His round child-like eyes stared heavenward as his birds sat about in mournful groups of twos and fours.

The unfortunate Vera again rushed into the kitchen and sent for the police before she ran, terrified by the sight she had just beheld, to awaken her husband. In about an hour, although it seemed longer, the poor folk of the village arrived and carried the body from the yard. Fat Luba insisted upon halting the procession long enough so that she could kiss the white forehead of the little dead master of the sky. A ring of pigeons swirled around the procession as it marched down the hill.

Vera nursed up a little fever for herself and was put to bed, while Luba, the cook, stood in the market-place and with tears in her eyes told everybody that the Captain killed her little Major of the Birds — "and now nobody will look after them, and they will make dirt everywhere.

And people will have to move away. And he is such a bad man to take the crumbs away from little doves. And if he has any children, I wish them the best of everything for they surely will be unfortunate."

Marking the spot where Peter fell were two new-born birds crushed beside the stone house on the hill. Through the air swung a grand flight describing an oval in the sky. At each end of the oval the pigeons beat their wings as they rounded the curve. With mournful thuds they beat, as they circled over the old farmer's house and again over the solid stone house on the hill.

All day they flapped a tattoo with their wings and beat their sorrowful dead sounds into lovely Vera's ears. In the evening the Captain sent for the doctor.

All night long the uncontrollable feathery tribes encircled the town with their monotonous beating and swishing of wings.

The next day Vera grew worse, as Luba in the market place kept insisting that the Captain killed her Little Master of the Birds; until a committee of three working-men took it upon themselves to investigate. They started for the hill, but stopped off in order to induce the schoolmaster to join them.

The schoolmaster, however, did not allow himself to be disturbed. He was playing chess with a friend, and kept tapping the dull-sounding table with his fingers, and repeating in a monotone: "If he disturbs that pawn, he may lose his queen."

As the committee went on to the hill, they were overtaken by the doctor in his carriage. At last they arrived at the stone house and found the doctor walking briskly up and down the drawing room smoking a cigarette — he had not yet told the Captain.

Upstairs they could hear the Captain in Vera's darkened room, kneel down beside the bed.

"Do you know, my darling," he spoke. "I have never kept anything from you — but the other day when I told you about the beggar, I should have told you that he was — Are you listening, my dear? I should have told you that he was the same boy — the poor boy that lived with the pigeons.

"See; we have already been — are you listening, my dear? God has already punished us — now you can get better and we will go away from here. We will go to some quiet place.—Are you listening, my dear? We will go to some — do you hear me, Vera? My darling girl, don't sleep now. Tell me, what did the doctor say? Wake up, Vera."—But the hand of death had already passed over Vera.

The Little Master of the Sky didn't need a grave and didn't want one. But they dug one for him just the same, at the end of the town. While his pigeons encircled the sky and swished the air, the villagers straightened his twisted, little body and slipped it into a narrow box, and lowered him down. The poor folk gave him a little grave, but he doesn't need it for he never uses it.